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# Holy Garbage, tho by Homer cook't

André Lefevere

My title is the phrase the Earl of Roscommon uses in his *Essay on Translated Verse* (in Steiner, p. 78) to refer to the reluctance translators of his time displayed in translating certain aspects of the Homeric universe of discourse: certain objects, customs or beliefs that were not considered to be acceptable in their own culture. Based on a comparison of translations of the funeral of Patroclus (*Iliad* XXIII), I shall make a few observations on the translation of what can be referred to as «aspects of a culture».

In literary translation, the way in which «aspects of a culture» are translated is heavily influenced by the following factors: the status of the source text, the self-image of the target culture, the types of texts deemed acceptable in it, the «poetic vocabulary» considered appropriate to it, the «cultural scripts», and the intended audience.

The status of the source text can run a whole gamut from central to peripheral in either culture. A text that is central in its own culture, such as the Arabic qasida, may never occupy the same central position in another culture. In Homer's case, it is safe to say that the *Iliad* was a «central» text both in its own culture and in Western European culture (no matter what languages that culture made use of) until about the time of Roscommon. In Macpherson's words: «The least impartial nations have contented themselves with giving the second place to the most favoured of their native poets. And to allow the first seat to Homer.» (1773, p. i)

The self-image of the target culture is by no means constant. One might make a case for the statement that if a particular culture has a low self-image, it will more readily translate (and make other kinds of literary imports) from another culture or cultures held to be superior to itself. In French Renaissance culture, for instance,

Homer was unreservedly looked up to. This attitude persists in Madame Dacier. French eighteenth century culture, though, which considered itself to have «come of age», no longer had the same unstinting admiration for the *Iliad*. The Renaissance translators would translate Homer also to learn and propagate the rules of the epic. The non-native culture was considered the repository of these rules. By the eighteenth century the native culture was considered superior to the non-native culture, and De la Motte strongly suggests that Homer should be judged by contemporary standards: «On condamne franchement Quinault, parce qu'il est de notre siècle; et le préjugé de l'antiquité fait qu'on n'ose sentir la faute d'Homère.» (De la Motte, 1970a, p. 197) In England, too, Homer was no longer seen as the supreme law-giver of the epic and his epics as the touchstones for all future epics. Rather, his stature was felt to exert a stifling influence on attempts to write those future epics:

The fetters, which the prevailing taste of modern Europe [shaped by those who admire Homer unreservedly] has imposed on poetry, may well be admitted as an excuse for a man of the best genius for not succeeding in the characteristical simplicity of Homer. (Macpherson, 1773, p. xii)

In the French target culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the epic as a genre, or type of literary text, no longer occupied the dominant position it did during the Renaissance, when Ronsard, for example, painstakingly composed a *Franciade* which remained largely unread, simply because a great poet just *had* to compose an epic. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the *tragédie* had usurped the predominant position of the epic. It is quite clear that in De la Motte's case, for example, the epic was judged by the standards of that *tragédie*. In England the situation was less clear-cut, owing to the stature of *Paradise Lost* as a national epic poem that was actually read, but it would not be an exaggeration to say that the epic was beginning to lose its dominant position there as well.

In the French target culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, poetic vocabulary was very narrowly defined by the *Académie*. This made it hard for translators to accurately translate objects, customs and beliefs of the Homeric world even if they had wished to go beyond the boundaries of the «agréable». The words were simply not there. Or rather, the words were there, but they were not deemed appropriate to a work of literature. The mere use of this class of words would condemn a translation to a sub-literary existence, no matter what its other virtues might be. Again, the situation was somewhat different in England, but certain parallels could be drawn between middle and late Augustan poetic diction and the restricted poetic vocabulary in France.

A «cultural script» may be defined as the accepted pattern of behavior that is expected of people playing certain roles in a given culture. In seventeenth-century France, for example, there was a precise cultural script for the role of king. Louis XIV himself had contributed significantly to the definition of that script. It in no way fit the Homeric kings, most of whom would have been considered impoverished noblemen by French «people of taste» had they had been alive in their day and age.

The last of the factors I wish to discuss is the audience. Since most translations from the classics were made for people who were well versed in Greek and Latin, or who had at least some knowledge of those languages, the information value of the translation was rather low. In fact, a case could be made for the non-translation or the «embellishing» translation of certain aspects of Homeric culture because most readers were able to look them up in the original if they so chose. There was one instance in which translations from the classics did have informational value, however: if and when they were made for use in the classroom, or to be read by young readers. In that case the translation would be strictly *ad usum Delphini*.

The translations of Homer made in France and England in and somewhat before Roscommon's time were still pre-philological and pre-historicist in nature. They therefore illustrate both the problem and the strategies devised for solving it with a clarity ultimately rooted in the cultural naiveté that preceded cultural relativism in the West. It was during the period under consideration that the image and prestige of the source text, the *Iliad*, came to be questioned. Mme Dacier's translation is a tribute to the genius of Homer, Houdar de la Motte's translation is the exact opposite.

William Cowper writes in his introduction to his translation of the *Iliad* that: «It is difficult to kill a sheep with dignity in a modern language.» (1814, p. xix) My contention is that language has nothing to do with it. If the image of the source text in the target culture is highly positive, the translation will be as literal as possible, and the sheep will be killed if need be. Or, in the words of Madame Dacier: «tout ce qui marque les mœurs doit être conservé» (1714, p. 359). When that image is no longer uniformly positive, more «liberties» will be taken, because the text is no longer «quasi-sacred»: «Dès que la morale s'est éclaircie, dès qu'il a paru des Philosophes, on a vu des censures d'Homère.» (De la Motte, 1970b, p. 205)

Once the source text is no longer «taboo», different attitudes towards it begin to emerge in the target culture. There are attempts to «justify» Homer: «He will appear to excel his own state of society, in point of decency and delicacy, as much as he has surpassed more

polished ages in point of genius.» (Wood, 1976, p. 171) Even De la Motte is willing to admit that Homer is not responsible for the times he lived in:

Dans les temps de ténèbres où il vivait, il n'a pu avoir des idées saines de la Divinité, et quelque esprit qu'on lui suppose, il n'a pu éviter absolument la contagion des erreurs et de l'absurdité du Paganisme. (1970b, p. 189)

Fifty years later Bitaubé understands that there are readers who will reject Homer because:

Plus une nation sera civilisée, plus elle aura de douceur, et plus on conçoit qu'il pourra s'y rencontrer des personnes qui auront de la peine à se plier à des moeurs fort opposées à ces caractères. (1822, p. 29)

There is also more or less wholesale acceptance of Homer, on the basis of an awakening historicism. Madame Dacier writes: «Je trouve les temps anciens d'autant plus beaux, qu'ils ressemblent moins aux nôtres.» (1713, p. xxv). Yet she also attempts to «justify» Homer against the «goût» of her own time, by invoking the authority of the most central book of her civilization, which is paradoxically another translation:

Il parle souvent de chaudrons, de marmites, de sang, de graisse, d'intestins, etc. On y voit des Princes dépouiller eux-mêmes les bêtes et les faire rôtir. Les gens du monde trouvent cela choquant; mais il faut voir que tout cela est entièrement conforme à ce que l'on voit dans l' Ecriture sainte. (1713, p. xxvi)

The different attitudes towards the source text give rise to different translational strategies. Madame Dacier writes, quite predictably: «J'avoue que je n'ai pas cherché à adoucir la force de ses traits pour les rapprocher de notre siècle.» (1713, xxiii). Barbin, one of the early «justifiers» states: «Je me suis servi de termes généraux, dont notre langue s'accommode mieux que de tout ce détail, particulièrement à l'égard de certaines choses qui nous paraissent aujourd'hui trop basses.» (1682, p. 11) Finally, De la Motte writes: «J'ai voulu que ma traduction fût agréable; et dès là, il a fallu substituer des idées qui plaisent aujourd'hui à d'autres idées qui plaisaient du temps d'Homère.» (1970b, p. 212)

The genre that is dominant in the receiving culture defines, to a large extent, the reader's horizon of expectation with regard to the translated work that is trying to take its place in that receiving culture. If it does not conform to the demands of the genre that dominates the receiving culture, its reception is likely to be rendered

less smooth, hence Madame Dacier's lament: «La plupart des gens sont gâtés aujourd'hui par la lecture de quantité de livres vains et frivoles et ne peuvent souffrir ce qui n'est pas dans le même goût.» (1713, p. v) This type of reader tends to expect «des héros bourgeois, toujours si polis, si doucereux et si propres» (1713, p.vi), and therefore quite different from the heroes of the *Iliad*. Hobbes remarks that «the names of instruments and tools of artificers, and words of art, though of use in the Schools, are far from being fit to be spoken by a hero.» (1667, p. iv) More than a hundred years later, Bitaubé echoes Madame Dacier's lament. Readers now have different expectations, but their expectations still determine the attitude with which they will be reading the translations of the *Iliad*: «Ce sont en partie les romans qui nous ont accoutumés à vouloir que tout fût héroïque dans un héros.» (Bitaubé, 1822, p. 23) Because the heroes are so different, and the customs so unpalatable to his audience, De la Motte admits: «C'est pour ces raisons que j'ai réduit les vingt-quatre livres de l'*Iliade* en douze, qui sont même de beaucoup plus courts que ceux d'Homère» (1970, 213a/b), even though he has done his best to make the heroes of the *Iliad* look more like the heroes his audience wanted to read about:

J'ai laissé aux Dieux leurs passions; mais j'ai tâché de leur donner toujours de la dignité. Je n'ai pas dépouillé les héros de cet orgueil injuste, où nous trouvons souvent de la grandeur; mais je leur ai retranché l'avarice et l'avidité qui les avilit à nos yeux. (1970b, p. 214)

Generic expectations nurtured by the dominant genre also affect the composition of the translation. De la Motte justifies the deep cuts he made in the *Iliad* by exclaiming:

Souffrirait-on au Théâtre, que dans les entr'Actes d'une Tragédie, on vînt nous dire tout ce qui doit arriver dans l'Acte suivant? Approuverait-on que l'action des principaux personnages y fût interrompue par les affaires des confidens? Non, sans doute. (1970a, p. 214)

In justifying his translation of the *Iliad*, De la Motte gives us a potted version of the dominant poetics of his time:

J'ai tâché de rendre la narration plus rapide qu'elle ne l'est dans Homère, les descriptions plus grandes et moins chargées de minuties, les comparaisons plus exactes et moins fréquentes. J'ai dégagé les discours de tout ce que j'ai cru contraire à la passion qu'ils expriment, et j'ai essayé d'y mettre cette gradation de force et de sens, d'où dépend leur plus grand effet. Enfin, j'ai songé à soutenir les caractères, parce que

c'est sur cette règle aujourd'hui si connue, que le Lecteur est le plus sensible et le plus sévère. (1970b, p. 214)

That generic expectations can be subtly different is pointed out by the following quote from the introduction to an English translation of the *Iliad*, almost contemporary with De la Motte's. Not only do the authors pronounce the French language «certainly the unfittest for Heroic Subjects» (Ozell et al., 1714, p. 4), they go on to say that «the French versification, especially of the Heroic sort, is intolerably tedious» (p. 4) and conclude that «the drone of a bagpipe affords every whit as much Harmony» (p. 6).

The potential audience also plays a part in determining which translational strategies are to be used to render «aspects of culture». If Homer is translated for the young, as he is often claimed to be, certain aspects of his culture are likely to be omitted. In Bitaubé's words: «Je n'ai pas perdu de vue l'instruction de la jeunesse et de ceux qui désirent d'étudier Homère dans l'original. Une traduction fidèle, sans être barbare, peut faciliter beaucoup cette étude.» (1822, p.47)

Finally, there is the matter of the cultural script. Whereas Homer's soldiers just sit about once they have put down the wood that will be used for Patroclus' funeral pyre, Madame Dacier makes them wait for orders -- what else is a good soldier supposed to do? Certainly not laze about. In Macpherson's translation, Achilles does not merely put the locks he has cut from his hair into the hands of the dead Patroclus; he does so neatly. De la Motte is definitely unable to accept the following two Homeric cultural scripts: «S'il décrit des blessures, c'est, selon la portée de son temps, avec une précision anatomique qui refroidit l'imagination» (1970a, p. 195), and «enfin, les discours les plus mal placés de tous, sont ceux que les hommes adressent à leurs chevaux.» (197b) Brought up on the «roi soleil» script, he also regrets that in Homer:

On ne voit point autour des Rois une foule d'officiers ni de gardes; les enfants des souverains travaillent aux jardins et gardent les troupeaux de leur père; les palais ne sont point superbes; les tables ne sont point somptueuses: Agamemnon s'habille lui-même, et Achille apprête de ses propres mains le repas qu'il donne aux Ambassadeurs d'Agamemnon. (De la Motte, 1970b, p. 192)

And now let us turn to the translations. The Greek noun «enorchès» means «he-goat» and is obviously associated with the adjective «enorchos», which Lidell and Scott define as: «with the testicles in, uncastrated». Goats did not have a good reputation in the cultural script of the target culture(s) in the seventeenth, eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, nor did testicles (even in the twentieth century, the Loeb Classical Library translation of «enorchès» is «rams, males without blemish»). Accordingly, Rochefort translates «enorchès» as «taureaux». Bitaubé turns the he-goats into «bélriers» (but without further specifications). Barbin probably adheres most closely to the cultural script of his time by translating the term as «agneaux», as does Madame Dacier.

The Homeric epithet «oinops» (wine-colored), often used in combination with the sea, also does not agree with the cultural script of the French translators. When Achilles looks out over the «oinopa ponton», the «wine-dark sea», Rochefort makes him look on «la plaine des mers», Bitaubé on «l'empire de la mer», Barbin and Dacier simply on «la mer».

A more obvious example of cultural script is the following. After they have built the funeral pyre, the Greek soldiers are dismissed. Only the leaders and the Myrmidons will stay for the actual lighting of the pyre. In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon tells the soldiers to go back to their «neas eisas», which the Loeb Classical Library translation accurately renders as «shapely ships». In Bitaubé the soldiers go back to their «tentes», because that is presumably where they are supposed to go, and in Dacier «dans leurs tentes et dans leurs vaisseaux», in two cultural scripts at the same time. Barbin has the soldiers go to their ships, but adds for the benefit of the reader interested in military strategy: «Comme il y avait même du péril que les Grecs y fussent surpris par les Troyens en cet état, où la plupart étaient sans armes et dispersés d'un côté et d'un autre.»

It should be obvious that the translators' knowledge of the Greek language has nothing to do with the «mistranslations» they produce. They do not turn he-goats into lambs because their Greek is defective, but rather because lambs are acceptable in their culture, whereas he-goats are not, at least not at that time.

A final example: Achilles sacrifices «doodeka de Trooon meghathumoon uieas esthlous/chalkooi dèioon; kaka de phresi mèdeto erga». In the Loeb Classical Library translation: «And twelve valiant sons of the great-souled Trojans/slew he with the bronze -- and grim was the work he purposed in his heart.» The translation is accurate, except for the fact that «dèioon» is really «cut down», more ferocious and less noble than «slew». Rochefort turns the two lines into four, and writes: «Il accomplit enfin son projet détestable/ Il s'élance, et, d'un glaive armant son bras coupable,/ Dans le sang malheureux de douze Phrygiens,/ Il trempe, sans pitié, ses homicides mains.» The whole passage has the ring of the «tragédie» to it. The bronze becomes a «glaive», and he actually bathes his hands in the blood of the victims. This action may have seemed barbaric to the Homeric



Greeks themselves, but is obviously acceptable to Rochefort's audience. In fact, that audience may well project this course of action back on the Greeks of Homer's time, thus replacing one cultural script by another.

In Bitaubé the bronze becomes «fer» and the evil in Achilles' heart becomes the much more standardized «courroux, que rien ne pouvait arrêter». Barbin remains vague, true to the principles set out in his preface. Achilles simply selects twelve Trojans and «leur fit perdre la vie». Dacier, probably somewhat shocked by the violence of the original, tries to mollify it -- contrary to what she says in her own preface -- by supplying the reader with the cultural context in which that violence is supposed to have taken place.

Enfin, pour achever d'apaiser l'ombre de son ami [not in Homer],  
il immole douze jeunes Troyens des plus vaillants et des meilleures  
familles, car l'excès de sa douleur et un désir de vengeance  
ne lui permettait pas de garder aucune modération.

Translating aspects of one culture into another is never a simple semantic substitution. Rather, the self-images of two cultures come to bear on the matter and clash over it. In Homer's time, as well as at the time of the translators we have referred to here, literature was the main expression of the self-image of a culture. Translations, therefore, can teach us much about certain aspects of a culture at certain stages of its evolution.

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